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BOLSTERING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER FUNCTION

by Jim Palmer

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ABSTRACT

Efforts have recently been undertaken to smooth the flow of students from community colleges to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Focusing on more than transfer of course credits, these efforts have involved multidimensional programs of cooperation with high schools and four-year institutions as well as programs which identify and assist potential transfer students. Some community colleges are taking direct or indirect steps to hone the skills of students who are still in high school (e.g., specifying and disseminating information on the academic competencies expected of college students, sponsoring programs to improve the test-taking or college survival skills of high school students, and offering classes to improve the reading, writing, and thinking skills of low-achieving students). Transfer is also promoted through articulation agreements with four-year colleges specifying the transferability of competencies as well as credits and formal and informal activities designed to promote dialogue among faculty members. Other manifestations of the movement to improve transfer rates are the development of assessment and tracking systems, which provide ongoing feedback on student progress toward graduation and transfer; and special support programs designed to promote the educational mobility of minority and disadvantaged students at urban community colleges. Efforts to improve transfer depend largely on the information systems that serve both college personnel and students. These efforts to strengthen the transfer function represent an attempt to place the community college more securely in the educational mainstream of student flow from high school through the baccalaureate. (LAL)

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BOLSTERING THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER FUNCTION

by Jim Palmer

During the 1960s and 1970s, expansion of the two-year college curriculum into noncollegiate areas took its toll on transfer studies and on the image of community colleges as collegiate institutions. But "attempts . . . to sweep the collegiate function out of the community colleges" never fully succeeded, and the 1980s have witnessed numerous efforts to restore the primacy of transfer education. (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p. 296) The public continues to perceive transfer education as the primary community college function. (Knoell, 1982, p.8) Furthermore, the disproportionately large number of minority students who start their collegiate careers at community colleges makes the transfer function a social imperative.

The following paragraphs examine efforts recently undertaken or recommended to smooth the flow of students from community colleges to baccalaureate-granting institutions. Focusing on much more than the articulation and transfer of course credit, those writing about transfer stress a multidimensional program involving (1) college involvement in efforts to improve student academic skills before college matriculation; (2) course and program articulation based on student competencies rather than credit transfer; (3) the identification, assessment, and tracking of potential transfer students; and (4) the development of information systems to monitor student progress.

Assisting High School Students

Because the road to transfer begins well before college matriculation, some colleges are taking direct or indirect steps to hone the skills of students who are still in high school. An indirect method of assisting high school students is the specification, publication, and dissemination of the academic competencies that are expected of entering college students. Illinois, for example, has adopted a uniform set of high school subject requirements (effective in the fall of 1990) for admission to university

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baccalaureate degree programs and to community college associate in arts and associate in science degree programs. Other colleges have taken a more direct approach, including Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio), Clark Technical College (Ohio), and the Community College of Philadelphia (Pennsylvania). Cuyahoga has assisted in a program designed to improve the test-taking skills of inner-city high school students and to help them build other skills needed to succeed in postsecondary education. Clark Technical College's "High School Liaison Project" has sponsored several programs for local high school students, including a a summer "bridge" workshop on college survival skills, and has also encouraged local high schools to participate in statewide testing programs that are designed to encourage high school juniors to seek remediation (if necessary) before college matriculation. The Community College of Philadelphia has cooperated with a local high school in a program designed to improve the reading, writing and thinking skills of low-achieving, poverty-level students in the eleventh grade. (Palmer, 1987)

Part of the movement to improve transfer rates, then, involves the reestablishment of ties between community colleges and high schools. While many college leaders in the post-World War II era worked to disassociate two-year institutions from their secondary-school origins, college-high school collaborations are reemerging in the effort to prepare disadvantaged and ill-prepared students for baccalaureate studies.

Articulation With Baccalaureate-Granting Institutions

Articulation agreements specifying the transferability of course credits have existed form the beginning of the junior college movement. But these agreements do not assure that community college transfer students will have the competencies requisite for academic success. Those studying articulation, therefore, now focus on the transferability of competencies as well as credits, arguing that it is necessary to ascertain whether credits carry with them the skills expected of upper-division students.

How is this to be accomplished? One alternative is to facilitate faculty dialog between the various sectors of higher education in an attempt "to determine the proper academic rigor and expected competencies of students completing courses within given disciplines" (Decker and Silverman, 1984, p. 82). Another approach is to appoint community college faculty members on a temporary basis as visiting instructors at four-year institutions and universities; this would reacquaint the instructors with university students and with the rigor needed for success at the upper division. A third method is the establishment of exit tests for transfer students. In Florida, for example, all students (including community college transfers) must pass a College-Level Academic Skills Test (CLAST) before assuming upper-division studies at public universities.

Assessment, Tracking, and Other Support Services

Another manifestation of the movement to improve community college transfer rates is the abandonment of the laissez-faire approach to student matriculation and academic progress. Following the lead of Miami-Dade Community College, two-year college educators are beginning to consider

student assessment and placement programs, tracking systems, and mandatory standards of academic progress. In addition, some colleges have established special support programs for minority and economically disadvantaged students whose goal is transfer.

Many educators and state agencies, however, see testing as only the first step in larger assessment and tracking systems, now largely accepted (in theory if not in practice) as a means of combating student attrition and increasing transfer and baccalaureate attainment rates. In California, for example, the Board of Governors of the state's community college system has recommended a matriculation plan that requires students to declare an educational objective and charges colleges with the responsibility of providing the assistance students need to meet those objectives. The plan has six components 1) an admissions procedure that solicits information on the students' goals and special needs; 2) mandatory orientation for new students; 3) pre-enrollment testing, assessment, and counseling; 4) academic advisement; 5) a computerized student tracking system to monitor student progress; and 6) a comprehensive system of institutional research and evaluation to assess the plan's effectiveness. The matriculation plan, however, has yet to be fully funded. (California Community Colleges, 1984).

Special support programs that are designed to promote the educational mobility of minority and other disadvantaged students have also been part of the movement to improve transfer. The American Association of Colleges has coordinated an Andrew W. Mellon Foundation grant that provides 12 baccalaureate-granting colleges with funds to be used in increasing the flow of community college transfers (especially minorities) to their institutions. The participating colleges have, among other things, developed articulation programs, offered transfer handbooks and counseling services, encouraged joint meetings of two-year and four-year college faculty, and developed special registration procedures for community college transfers. The Ford Foundation's Urban Community College Transfer Opportunity Program has funded similar projects at 24 community colleges. Focusing on minority students, these projects sought to improve transfer through course and curriculum development, testing and tracking, and other special services such as tutorials and counseling (Cohen and others, 1985).

Information Problems

Efforts to improve transfer depend largely on the information systems that serve both college personnel and students. College educators need to identify potential transfer students, gather information on their skills deficiencies (if any), accumulate data on student progress through the educational program, and provide indices of the success students have in transferring and subsequently attaining the baccalaureate. Students also need information, including feedback on their educational progress, information on college support services, and information on the transferability of coursework.

Miami-Dade Community College has done much pioneering work in this area. The college's mandatory assessment program provides a built-in system for identifying and determining the skill levels of those students who are accumulating credit hours from several classes and who might therefore be potential transfer students. In addition, the college's Advisement and Graduation

Information System (AGIS) and Academic Alert and Advisement System (AAAS) provide continuous information on student academic progress. Other examples of computerized information systems include ASSIST and ESCALATE, online systems used to provide articulation information in California and Michigan. But outside of these signal cases, the literature yields little evidence of success in the development of large-scale information systems that monitor and assist student flow through the educational pipeline.

Bolstering Transfer: Conclusion

Because universities and four-year colleges never relinquished lower-division instruction to the emerging junior colleges of the early twentieth century, two-year institutions developed as adjunctive colleges, largely outside of the educational continuum stretching from kindergarten through graduate school (Cohen, 1983). The adjunctive nature of the junior college was reinforced by the addition of noncollegiate functions to the curriculum in the 1960s and 1970s. Today's efforts to strengthen the transfer function, however, represent an attempt to place the community college more securely in the educational mainstream. Transfer, then, is increasingly viewed as a multidimensional problem of student flow from high school through the baccalaureate and not simply as a matter of credit articulation.

For Further Information

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